

# Edmund Husserl's Early Metaphysics and its Context

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## Introduction

In my presentation I aim to treat Edmund Husserl's early metaphysical theory (1907–1913) in the context of his general philosophical efforts. In this relatively early period of his career, Husserl already elaborated his systematic conception of a phenomenologically grounded metaphysics. In this conception he spoke of a universally evolving world with immortal souls (monads) in it, who reincarnate on increasingly developed levels of subjectivity, and of God who inheres in all those souls, and who is the inner engine of the universal teleology of the world. The earliest document presenting these thoughts in a most systematic and elaborate way, the B II 2 manuscript (1907-1910, main parts from 1908), whose main parts has been recently published in *Husserliana* Volume 42, (a couple of pages in *Husserliana* Volume 13). This text will be in the focus of the last part of my presentation.

It is well-known that Husserl juxtaposed his phenomenological method with traditional metaphysics in a very rigorous manner. “Phenomenology is anti-metaphysical” he said in 1927, in the first version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*-article (Hua 9: 253, [English <1997>: 101]). In *Cartesian Meditations* (in 1929) he said: “Phenomenology [...] *excludes every naïve metaphysics*” (Hua 1: 182, [English <1960>: 156]). But he also added to such places, that phenomenology by no means excludes every metaphysics in general, only the naïve, phenomenologically ungrounded, traditional form of it. In 1936, in his last main work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, he wrote: “To bring latent reason to the understanding of its own possibilities and thus to bring to insight the possibility of metaphysics as a true possibility” (Hua 6: 13, [English <1970>: 15]). But already in 1896, in his lectures on *Logic*, he attributed a central role to metaphysics. He wrote: “The task of metaphysics is to reveal the unrevised, oft unnoticed metaphysical presuppositions, which are nevertheless of utmost importance, and to make them object of scientific research” (Hua Mat 1: 5).<sup>1</sup> The closer look on Husserl's writings shows that the metaphysical objectives had always a central role for him, throughout his entire career.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. also: *Aus der Einleitung der Vorlesung “Erkenntnistheorie und Hauptpunkte der Metaphysik”*, 1898/89. In Hua Mat 3.

To this problem see also the study of Emiliano Trizio: “Husserl's early concept of metaphysics as the ultimate science of reality”. In: *The New Yearbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, 2019: 309-330.

But it was not before the second half of the first decade of the 1900s, that Husserl arrived at the idea of a systematically elaborated, transcendental-phenomenologically grounded metaphysics, which is in the position of treating the central questions of classical, traditional metaphysics; questions, which aimed at the problems of immortality (or mortality) of the soul, the existence (or non-existence) of God, teleology and the ultimate ethical values. (Husserl referred to these problems for time to time as “the ultimate and highest questions”, [e.g. Hua 9: 299, Hua 1:165]). This present paper has two main aims. *First*: I will try to show that these metaphysical ideas were by no means isolated and arbitrary attempts motivated by Husserl’s speculative sympathies or personal religious attitude; they were indeed necessary, logical consequences of his overall philosophical development. Such as ideas, as well as the systematic metaphysical efforts from the second half of the first decade of the 1900s (which lasted till the end of Husserl’s life), were the inevitable results, the methodological and thematic implications of his widening the scope of phenomenological philosophy. In particular, I would like to highlight three main moments in Husserl’s thought around 1905/06: namely 1) the deepening his notion of constitution, 2) the relationship between objectifying and non-objectifying acts became more symmetrical than it was before and three: the notion of teleology came to the fore.

The *second main objective* of this presentation: to give a short overview of Husserl’s early speculative metaphysics, alongside with his notion of phenomenologically based construction, as it appeared in him between 1907 and 1913.

## **I. Widening the scope of phenomenology: from the philosophical foundations of mathematics and logic to a phenomenologically grounded metaphysics.**

We could reconstruct Husserl’s intellectual development from 1886 to 1907/08 as a continuous widening of the scope of his philosophy; starting with a theory of mathematics and finally arriving at speculative metaphysical and even theological questions. In his early works, in *On the Concept of Number* (1887) and then in the *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891), his main goal was the philosophical grounding of mathematics. Then the logic of his related researches gradually forced him to proceed towards a philosophical theory of thought and perception, towards a descriptive science of ideal and real objects. These philosophical endeavours culminated in his first main work, in the *Logical Investigations* (1900/01). Right after the publication of this book, which presented for the first time the systematic “breakthrough” of phenomenology, Husserl felt it necessary to widen the scope of phenomenology as to yield an overall theory of consciousness; its structures, achievements and forms of functioning. These investigations were crystallized in huge branches of manuscripts, which were written mostly between 1900 and

1914, and which had the title of *Studies on the Structure of Consciousness*; which are now just before publication in Husserliana Series. The most important development in this progress – at least in my interpretation – is the “transcendental turn”, the “discovery” of phenomenological reduction, around 1905; which was presented in a systematic way for a wider audience for the first time in his *Introduction to logic and the theory of knowledge. Lectures 1906/07* (Hua 24). The transcendental turn focused the philosophical attention first and foremost on the constituting consciousness and on its achievements. In my interpretation there were three major innovations in this period (around 1905, partly as results of the transcendental turn): the idea of constitution came to the fore, the relationship of objectifying and non-objectifying acts became more symmetric than before and – last but not least – teleology proved to be an essential and ineliminable structure of consciousness as such.

The first moment is the idea of constitution. I agree with Robert Sokolowski, who, in his classical monography on Husserl’s theory of constitution (*The Formation of Husserl's Concept of Constitution*), stated that the seed of this theory could already be found right in the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, in 1891; and it could also be found in a relatively well-formed state in the *Logical Investigations*. But it was around 1905/06 when the notion of constitution received its fully articulated meaning, and became a central concept of Husserl’s phenomenology. Constitution in Husserl was the universal power of consciousness to unfold, to disclose the things in the way they are, to bestow sense, to borrow meaning to things. Constitution is performed always according to apriori laws; constitution is never arbitrary; it is an apriori structural relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. The consciousness can experience any objectivity as (ideal or real) objectivity only due to the universal capacity and performance of constitution.

The second issue is the fact that after 1905 the relationship between objectifying and non-objectifying acts became more symmetric. In the *Logical Investigations* the objectifying acts, and the logical reason in particular, had an absolute precedence over non-objectifying (valuating, volitive, practical, emotional) activities. This stance started to change in his massive, three volumes long, at the moment still unpublished work, *Studies on the Structure of Consciousness*. After 1905 the primacy of logical reason and objectifying acts slowly started to disappear. Non-objectifying acts (such as acts of evaluation, praxis and emotion) and objectifying ones got on the same hierarchical level. What does it mean, from the point of view of Husserl’s transformation and widening of the scope of phenomenology? It means that acts of practical and axiological rationality became as important as theoretical acts; and they all contributed to the disclosure of world and objectivity on their own. Practical, axiological and theoretical activities, achievements were different form of constitution.

The third point is the phenomenon of teleology. Though Husserl used the term “teleology” since 1890 at the latest (c.f. e.g. Hua 12: 359, 364 [in a negative way]), and we can also meet this expression in the *Logical Investigations* (e.g. Hua 18: 40, 197-200, 204, 207, 211, Hua 19: 804), it gained a significantly phenomenological role only after 1905, as a phenomenological structure, an inherent, essential characteristic of consciousness; (as in *Introduction to logic and the theory of knowledge. Lectures 1906/07*; c.f. Hua 24: 138, 387 [1906], 427f [1908]). The acts of consciousness, the processes of constitution have an inherent, ineliminable, structural directedness. It means that “teleology” is not a metaphysical, speculative substruction, but an inner aim or goal, an essential “telos” of every conscious acts and processes, which could be discovered and described in a phenomenological way. The empty act is directed to fulfilment. Axiological acts, which unfold potential values concerning the world, are directed to realize those values. Communities could also have their intersubjectively valid, accepted and governing ideals. The big question is, does the *natural world* have its – phenomenologically demonstrable – teleology too? In a certain form, *yes*. In the natural world, we can unfold a sort of *empirical* teleology: in the functionality of physical body, different grades of biological complexity, direction of evolution to increase complexity. But Husserl, after his transcendental turn, aims to discover an apriori, transcendental form of teleology.

Here come axiological acts (which are now placed on the same level as objectifying, theoretical acts) into play! The phenomenological glance can unfold axiological potentialities in the world, which are directed teleologically to their realization. Moreover: a more complex lived body can constitute the world in a richer, deeper and more complex way. This insight implies also the thought of an apriori, transcendental teleology. But there is something more too: the infinite richness and complexity of the world implies a subject, *who* can constitute this in its infinite richness and complexity, but who (because this constitutional activity would imply an infinitely complex body, which is not factually possible) isn’t transcendent in regard of the finite subjects, but somehow immanent to them.

In the following section we try to explain the meaning of this conception.

## **II. Details of Husserl’s phenomenologically grounded early metaphysics**

In the end, we are speaking of the possibility and also actuality of an infinite consciousness. How could we phenomenologically legitimize such an idea? This conception in Husserl is strongly connected with the details of *transcendental idealism*, which he started to elaborate after 1905, so after his transcendental turn. He established a very strong connection between constituting subjectivity and constituted object in the writings of this period. According to him,

the very idea of an actually existing thing prescribes the existence of a consciousness, which could constitute the thing and the whole physical reality, in its infinite richness, in its entirety, (cf. Hua 36: 77, [manuscript from June 1913]).

In this period – and the case will remain the same till the end of Husserl’s life – our philosopher thinks that possible experiences, cognitive and axiological acts are (in a similar manner like empty acts) teleologically directed to their realization; and those pure (but always real) possibilities imply the actual existence of a consciousness, which in fact realizes them. Here we must raise a fundamental question: if, in Husserl, the ultimate source of every legitimate knowledge (which is worthy enough to this name) is originally giving intuition, (as he puts it in 1912, in the *Ideas*), then how he thinks to speak in a philosophically, phenomenologically legitimate manner about those things, we have just mentioned? How one could raise questions concerning God, immortality in a phenomenologically grounded manner? In two words: *phenomenological construction*.

The term “construction” was mostly a pejorative expression for Husserl. It referred to philosophically ungrounded, phenomenologically illegitimate operations. The phenomenology deals with “constitution”, traditional metaphysics operates with unfounded, hypothetical constructions. Phenomenology based upon original intuitions; classical metaphysics with groundless constructions, which yield no valid knowledge. But, around 1906/07, the idea of a phenomenologically grounded, legitimate form of construction started to take shape (26 years before Fink’s *Sixth Cartesian Meditations* [1932]!); such a phenomenological procedure, which is based upon evident intuitions, but which brings us beyond the limits of intuitive givenness. According to Husserl, after the phenomenological clarification and reflection of what is evidently given in original intuition, we can unfold indications in that phenomenologically purified intuitive givenness, what motivates some constructive actions, which lead us beyond the borders of the visible, but which nevertheless count as phenomenologically legitimate. We can meet examples of such phenomenologically motivated constructions in manuscripts like B II 2, B I 4, and lectures like *Lectures on ethics and value theory, 1908-1914* (Hua 28) and *Logic and general theory of science. Lectures from 1910/11* (Hua 30).

From this point of view, the most systematic and all-embracing early document in Husserl is folder B II 2 (Hua 13: 5-9, Hua 42: 137-168). In that document Husserl is speaking about nature, as “*a necessary construction in the actual consciousnesses*” (Hua 42: 150-151). What is even more interesting from our present point of view, is Husserl’s attempt of construction concerning the immortality of soul and the existence of God. According to Husserl every finite soul (or monad) is a finite mode of access to objective reality. No matter how rich a finite

subject constitutes reality, this way of constitution is necessary *finite*, and thus, *incomplete*. Even the sum total of the constitutive achievement of souls (monades) concerning reality is fragmentary, dispersed and in this way incomplete. An infinitely complex and rich reality demands (according to the principles of transcendental idealism that Husserl has just recently formulated) an infinite subject, who can constitute it in its entirety in one person; and also has an access to the experiences of the finite monads; so, who can constitute the world both in an infinite and through the finite subjects in concrete, particular, finite ways too.

Other emphatic, important document of phenomenological construction of this period is his lecture on ethics from 1911; where he explicitly uses this method, (Hus 28: 170-182, also: 225-227). God appears in this seminar as a pole-idea (just like in his *Ideas*). An infinitely perfect world demands the actual reality of an infinitely perfect consciousness, who can constitute it as infinitely perfect. All the aesthetic and epistemological values concerning the world claim a universal subject, who can constitutively realize them. God, according to Husserl's early constructive phenomenology, has at least two essential aspects. On the one hand, he is an idea; the ultimate ideal of every perfection, the supreme goal of every teleology and development, which is infinitely far away from every finite thing. On the other hand, he is not only an ideal, some vain abstraction, but a very concrete person, who has an access to every particular, finite subject too; who can also experience their experiences and thoughts from the first person view perspective; and who is the innermost engine of every development and teleology.

In the manuscript B II 2, this latter, personal aspect is more emphatic in Husserl. There he characterizes God with the following words (Hua 42: 168):

Of course we should not think of this *universal I* – who embraces every I-s and reality in himself – as an empirical I. He is *infinite life, infinite love and infinite will*. His infinite life is *the only activity*; and because *he is infinite fulfilment, he is also infinite happiness*. God also experiences himself every suffering, every misfortune, every mistake too; and only because he lives in others, and he feels with others, can he overcome his finitude, his willing-not-to-be towards an infinite harmony, *which is his present state. God is everywhere, God's life lives in every life*.

## Summary

In my presentation I tried to give an overview of Husserl's early, systematic metaphysical efforts, which were – as we could see – deeply embedded to the context of his overall philosophical endeavours; and from a certain point of view they were necessary consequence of his general philosophical researches. We saw that Husserl's systematic metaphysical conception

strongly connected with his ideas concerning constitution, axiological acts and teleology. Husserl also had the idea of intuition-based, phenomenologically motivated constructions, in order to lay the foundations of legitimate, speculative metaphysics. According to this metaphysics the souls (the finite monads) were finite, particular access of the Absolute to itself; and God – as the ultimate goal and engine of every development and teleology – had two essential, strongly interrelated aspects: He was an ideal on the one hand, and also a person in the strict sense of the word, on the other hand.